



(Source: © Jay Coakley)

# THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

## What Is It and Why Study It?

Our sports belong to us. They came up from the people. They were invented for reasons having nothing to do with money or ego. Our sports weren't created by wealthy sports and entertainment barons like the ones running sports today.

—Ken Reed, Sport Policy Director,  
League of Fans (2011).

Why should we play sport? Why not just have everyone exercise? [. . . Because sport] takes you to the edge of a cliff, and it's at that edge of the cliff where you understand your creative soul.

—Brian Hainline, chief medical officer,  
NCAA (in Wolverton, 2014)

New York joins 34 other states and the District of Columbia in recognizing competitive cheerleading as a sport. Section VI and the state will make a distinction between traditional, sideline cheerleading and competitive cheerleading, he said. Schools will decide for themselves which type of team they want.

—Barbara O'Brien, staff reporter,  
Buffalo News (2014).

Sports is real. . . . Sports is Oprah for guys. . . . Sports is woven deeper into American life than you know. You may change religion or politics, but not sport teams.

—Rick Reilly (2009)

## *Chapter Outline*

**About This Book**

**About This Chapter**

**Using Sociology to Study Sports**

**Defining Sports**

**What Is the Sociology of Sport?**

**Why Study Sports in Society?**

**Summary: Why Study the Sociology of Sport?**

## *Learning Objectives*

- Explain what sociologists study about sports and why sociology of sport knowledge is different from information in sports media and everyday conversations.
- Understand issues related to defining sports and why a sociological definition differs from official definitions used by high schools, universities, and other organizations.
- Explain what it means to say that sports are social constructions and contested activities.
- Explain why sociology of sport knowledge may be controversial among people associated with sports.
- Understand the meaning of "ideology" and how ideologies related to gender, race, social class, and ability are connected with sports.

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

If you're reading this book, you have an interest in sports or know people who play or watch them. Unlike most books about sports, this one is written to take you beyond scores, statistics, and sports personalities. The goal is to focus on the "deeper game" associated with sports, the game through which sports become part of the social and cultural worlds in which we live.

Fortunately, we can draw on our experiences as we consider this deeper game. Take high school sports in the United States as an example. When students play on a high school basketball team, we know that it can affect their status in the school and the treatment they receive from teachers and peers. We know it has potential implications for their prestige in the community, self-images and self-esteem, future relationships, opportunities in education and the job market, and their overall enjoyment of life.

Building on this knowledge enables us to move further into the deeper game associated with high school sports. For example, why do so many Americans place such importance on sports and accord such high status to elite athletes? Are there connections between high school sports and widespread beliefs about masculinity and femininity, achievement and competition, pleasure and pain, winning and fair play, and other important aspects of U.S. culture?

Underlying these questions is the assumption that sports are more than games, meets, and matches. They're important aspects of social life that have meanings going far beyond scores and performance statistics. Sports are integral parts of the social and cultural contexts in which we live, and they provide stories and images that many of us use to evaluate our experiences and the world around us.

Those of us who study sports in society are concerned with these deeper meanings and stories associated with sports. We do research to increase our understanding of (1) the cultures and societies

in which sports exist; (2) the social worlds created around sports; and (3) the experiences of individuals and groups associated with sports.

## ABOUT THIS CHAPTER

This chapter is organized to answer four questions:

1. What is sociology, and how is it used to study sports in society?
2. What are sports, and how can we identify them in ways that increase our understanding of their place and value in society?
3. What is the sociology of sport?
4. Who studies sports in society, and for what purposes?

The answers to these questions will be our guides for understanding the material in the rest of the book.

## USING SOCIOLOGY TO STUDY SPORTS

Sociology provides useful tools for investigating sports as social phenomena. This is because **sociology** is the study of the social worlds that people create, maintain, and change through their relationships with each other.<sup>1</sup> The concept of **social world** refers to an identifiable sphere of everyday actions and relationships (Unruh, 1980). Social worlds are created by people, but they involve much more than individuals doing their own things for their own reasons. Our actions, relationships, and collective activities form patterns that could not be predicted only with information about each of us as individuals. These patterns constitute identifiable ways of life and social

<sup>1</sup>Important concepts used in each chapter are identified in **boldface**. Unless they are accompanied by a footnote that contains a definition, the definition will be given in the text itself. This puts the definition in context rather than separating it in a glossary. Definitions are also provided in the Subject Glindex.

arrangements that are maintained or changed over time as people interact with one other.

Social worlds can be as large and impersonal as an entire nation, such as the United States or Brazil, or as personal and intimate as your own family. But regardless of size, they encompass all aspects of social life: (a) the values and beliefs that we use to make sense of our lives; (b) our everyday actions and relationships; and (c) the groups, organizations, communities, and societies that we form as we make choices, develop relationships, and participate in social life.

Sociologists often refer to **society**, which is a relatively self-sufficient collection of people who maintain a way of life in a particular territory. In most cases, a society and a nation are one and the same, such as Brazil and Brazilian society. But there are cases where a society is not a nation, such as Amish Mennonite society as it exists in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and other parts of the United States.

The goal of sociology is to describe and explain social worlds, including societies—how they are created, re-created, and changed; how they are organized; and how they influence our lives and our relationships with each other. In the process of doing sociology we learn to see our lives and the lives of others “in context”—that is, in the social worlds in which we live. This enables us to identify the social conditions that set limits or create possibilities in people’s lives. On a personal level, knowing about these influential conditions also helps us anticipate and sometimes work around the constraints we face at the same time that we look for and take advantage of the possibilities. Ideally, it helps us gain more control over our lives as well as an understanding of other people and the conditions that influence their lives.

### Key Sociology Concepts

Sociologists use the concepts of culture, social interaction, and social structure to help them understand sports as social activities.

**Culture** consists of *the shared ways of life and shared understandings that people develop as they live together*. Once a culture exists, it influences relationships and social interaction.

**Social interaction** consists of *people taking each other into account and, in the process, influencing each other’s feelings, thoughts, and actions*. Through interaction, we learn to anticipate the thoughts and actions of others and predict how others may respond to what we think and do.

**Social structure** consists of *the established patterns of relationships and social arrangements that take shape as people live, work, and play with each other*. This is the basis for order and organization in all social worlds.

These three concepts—culture, social interaction, and social structure—represent the central interconnected aspects of all social worlds. For example, a high school soccer team is a social world formed by players, coaches, team parents, and regular supporters. Over time every team creates and maintains a particular *culture* or a way of life consisting of values, beliefs, norms, and everyday social routines. Everyone involved with the team engages in *social interaction* as they take each other into account during their everyday activities on and off the playing field. Additionally, the recurring actions, relationships, and social arrangements that emerge as these people interact with each other make up the *social structure* of the team. This combination of culture, social interaction, and social structure comprises the team as a social world, and it is connected with the larger social world in which it exists.

Peer groups, cliques, and athletic teams are social worlds in which participants are known to one another. Communities, societies, concert crowds, and online chat rooms are social worlds in which participants are generally unknown to each other. This means that the boundaries of social worlds may be clear, fuzzy, or overlapping, but we generally know when we enter or leave a social world because each has identifying features related to culture, social interaction, and social structure.

We move back and forth between familiar social worlds without thinking. We make nearly automatic shifts in how we talk and act as we accommodate changing cultural, interactional, and structural features in each social world. However, when we enter or participate in a new or unfamiliar social world, we usually pay special attention to what is happening. We watch what people are doing, how they interact with each other, and we develop a sense of the recurring patterns that exist in their actions and relationships. If you've done this, then you're ready to use sociology to study sports in society.

### **Sociological Knowledge Is Based on Research and Theory**

My goal in writing this book is to accurately represent research in the sociology of sport and discuss issues of interest to students. At a time when online searches provide us with infinite facts, figures, and opinions about sports, I am primarily interested in the knowledge produced through systematic research. I use newspaper articles and other media as sources for examples, but I depend on research results when making substantive points and drawing conclusions. This means that my statements about sports and sport experiences are based, as much as possible, on studies that use surveys, questionnaires, interviews, observations, content analyses, and other accepted methods of research in sociology.

The material in this book is different than material in blogs, talk radio, television news shows, game and event commentaries, and most of our everyday conversations about sports. It is organized to help you critically examine sports as they exist in people's lives. I use research findings to describe and explain as accurately as possible the important connections between sports, society, and culture. I try to be fair when using research to make sense of the social aspects of sports and sport experiences. This is why over 1700 sources are cited as references for the information and analysis in this book.

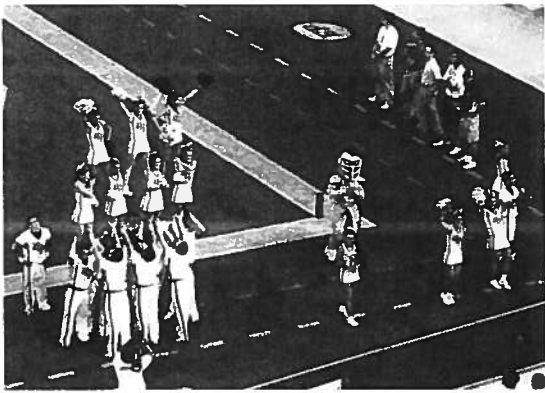
Of course, I want to hold your attention as you read, but I don't exaggerate, purposely withhold, or present information out of context to impress you and boost my "ratings." In the process, I hope you will extend your critical thinking abilities so you can assess what people believe and say about sports in society. This will enable you to make informed decisions about sports in your life and the social worlds in which you live.

### **DEFINING SPORTS**

Most of us know enough about the meaning of sports to talk about them with others. However, when we study sports, it helps to precisely define our topic. For example, is it a sport when young people choose teams and play a baseball game in the street or when thirty people of various ages spend an afternoon learning and performing tricks at a skateboard park? These activities are sociologically different from what occurs at major league baseball games and X Games skateboard competitions. These differences become significant when parents ask if playing sports builds the character of their children, when community leaders ask if they should use tax money to fund sports, and when school principals ask if sports are valid educational activities.

When I say that I study sports, people ask if that includes jogging, double-dutch, weight lifting, hunting, scuba diving, darts, auto racing, chess, poker, ultimate fighting, paintball, piano competitions, ballroom dancing, skateboarding, Quidditch, and so on. To respond is not easy, because there is no single definition that precisely identifies sports in all cultures at all times (Lagaert & Roose, 2014).

According to definitions used widely in North America and much of Europe, **sports are physical activities that involve challenges or competitive contests.** They are usually organized so that participants can assess their performances and compare them to the performances of others or to their own performances from one situation to



Is "Competitive Cheer" and sideline cheerleading a sport? The answer to this question is important because it impacts the budgets, participation rates, and gender equity decisions in U.S. high school and college sport programs. Sociologists study why certain activities are considered to be sports, who has the power to make such decisions, and how those decisions affect people's lives (Lamb & Priyadharshini, 2015). (Source: © Jay Coakley)

another. However, the organization, meaning, and purpose of sports often vary from one cultural context to another.

Some sports are organized to emphasize free-flowing, playful action and exist primarily for the pleasure of the participants. Examples include 5K fun runs, spontaneous games of Ultimate in open areas, and skateboarding in the streets or local skate parks. In contrast, other sports are organized to include scheduled and regulated action with participants displaying their skills for the pleasure of spectators. These include professional and other elite sports that people follow through media and pay to see in person. NFL games, matches in professional soccer leagues, and major golf tournaments are examples.

Most sports, however, are organized in ways that fall somewhere between these two extremes. They are formally organized and, even though people may watch them, they exist mostly for participants, who enjoy them, value the skills needed to play

them, and receive external rewards, such as peer or family approval, social status, or formal awards for playing them. Softball leagues, scheduled volleyball tournaments, and most organized youth sports are examples.

Scholars who study sports as social phenomena generally use a flexible and inclusive definition of sport. Although past research in the sociology of sport has focused mainly on what you and I would describe as "organized sports," current research often focuses on **physical culture**, which includes all forms of movement and physical activities that people in particular social worlds create, sustain, and regularly include in their collective lives. This could be tai chi done in a Beijing park, capoeira in a Sao Paulo plaza, parkour in a Paris neighborhood, or break-dancing in New York City's Central Park.

Of course, organized sports are a central and often dominant component of physical culture in many societies today, but it has not always been this way and there continue to be societies in which traditional folk games and expressive forms of movement are more important than formally organized, competitive sports. Research on physical culture is important because it helps us understand how people think and feel about their bodies and how they define movement and integrate it into their lives. Additionally, it provides a foundation for critically examining the deeper game associated with sports in society.

### Official Definitions of Sports

Defining *sport* in official terms and choosing specific activities that qualify as sports is an important process in organizations, communities, and societies. Being classified as an official sport gives special status to an activity and is likely to increase participation, funding, community support, and general visibility. For example, in Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries, walking, bicycling, and certain forms of general exercise are considered to be "sports." Therefore, those who

participate regularly in these activities often see themselves as “sportspeople” and are treated that way by their peers. Additionally, public policies are likely to provide common spaces for these activities and financial support for events that include them.

The official definitions of sport used by organizations and officials in the United States are more exclusive in that they give priority to formally organized, competitive activities. Therefore, even though walking is encouraged for general health purposes, most people in the United States would not consider walking a sport, nor would they ever describe walkers as sportspeople. This is important because it also may mean that walking trails and walking events will receive much less financial and political support than stadiums and arenas in which elite and professional sports are played and watched—because these are seen as the “real” or official sports.

According to most people in the United States, Canada, and a growing number of other societies, sports involve rules, competition, scoring, winners and losers, schedules and seasons, records, coaches, referees, and governing bodies that set rules and sponsor championships. Additionally, organizations such as local park and recreation departments, state high school athletic federations, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), and the United States Olympic Committee use their own criteria for defining *sport* and selecting activities for official recognition as sports for purposes of funding and support.

Official definitions of sport have important implications. When a definition emphasizes rules, competition, and high performance, many people will be excluded from participation, and decide that they are not fit to play, or avoid other physical activities that are defined as “second class.” For example, when a twelve-year-old is cut from an exclusive club soccer team, she may not want to play in the local league sponsored by the park and recreation department because she sees it as “recreational activity” rather than a real sport. This can create a situation in which most people

are physically inactive at the same time that a small number of people perform at relatively high levels for large numbers of spectators—a situation that negatively impacts health and increases health-care costs in a society or community. When sport is defined to include a wide range of physical activities that are played for pleasure and integrated into local expressions of social life, physical activity rates will be high and overall health benefits are likely.

### Sports Are Social Constructions

Understanding the sociology of sport is easier if you learn to think of sports as **social constructions**—that is, as *parts of the social world that are created by people as they interact with one another under particular social, political, and economic conditions*. This means that the kinds of sports that exist and gain popularity often tell us much about the values and orientations of those who play, watch, or sponsor them. They also tell us about who has power in a social world.

Just as defining and identifying *official* sports is part of a political process, with outcomes that benefit some people more than others, so is the process of creating and sustaining sports in a social world. This becomes apparent when we examine the struggles that often occur over whose ideas will be used when making decisions about the following sport-related issues:

1. What is the meaning and primary purpose of sports, and how should sports be organized to fit that meaning and purpose?
2. Who will play sports with whom, and under what conditions will they play?
3. What agencies or organizations will sponsor and control sports?

Heated debates occur when people have different answers to these questions. History shows that some of these debates have caused conflicts and led to lawsuits, government intervention, and

the passage of laws. For example, people often disagree about the meaning, purpose, and organization of cheerleading in U.S. high schools. School officials have traditionally said that cheerleading is not a sport because its primary purpose is to support high school teams. But as competitive cheer teams have been organized to train and compete against other teams at least 34 state high school activities associations now define "cheer" as an official sport. This is important because the stakes are high: being designated an official sport brings funding and other support that changes its status and meaning in schools, communities, and society.

Disagreements and struggles over the purpose, meaning, and organization of sports occur most often when they involve the funding priorities of government agencies. For example, if the primary purpose of sport is to improve health and fitness for everyone, then funding should go to sports with widespread participation resulting in net positive effects on physical well-being. But if people see sports as "wars without weapons" with the purpose being to push the limits of human ability, then funding should go to sports organized to produce high-performance athletes who can achieve competitive victories. This issue is regularly contested at the national and local levels of government, in universities and public school districts, and even in families, as people decide how to use resources to support physical activities.

These examples show that sports are **contested activities**—that is, *activities for which there are no timeless and universal agreements about what they mean, why they exist, or how they should be organized*. This is also illustrated by historical disagreements over who is allowed to play sports and the conditions under which certain people can play. Cases involving extended struggles are listed in the box, "Who Plays and Who Doesn't" (p. 10).

The third issue that makes sports contested activities focuses on who should provide the resources needed to play them and who should

control them. When people see sports contributing to the common good, it is likely that sport facilities and programs will be supported by government agencies and tax money. When people see sports as primarily contributing to individual development, it is likely that sport facilities and programs will be supported by individuals, families, and private-corporate sponsors. However, in both cases there will be struggles over the extent to which sponsors control sports and the extent to which sports are organized to be consistent with community values.

Struggles over these three issues show that using a single definition of sports may lead us to overlook important factors in a particular social world, such as who has power and resources and how meanings are given to particular activities at different times in a community or society. Being aware of these factors enables us to *put sports into context* and understand them in the terms used by those who create, play, and support them. It also helps us see that the definition of sports in any context usually represents the ideas and interests of some people more than others. In the sociology of sport, this leads to questions and research on whose ideas and interests count the most when it comes to determining (1) the meaning, purpose, and organization of sports; (2) who plays under what conditions; and (3) how sports will be sponsored and controlled. Material in each of the following chapters summarizes the findings of this research.

## WHAT IS THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT?

The **sociology of sport** is primarily a subdiscipline of sociology and physical education that studies sports as social phenomena. Most research and writing in the field focuses on "organized, competitive sports," although people increasingly study other forms of physical activities that are health and fitness oriented and informally organized. These include recreational, extreme, adventure,

*reflect on*  
**SPORTS**

**Who Plays and Who Doesn't**  
*Contesting a Place in Sports*

Being cut from a youth sport team is a disappointing personal experience. But being in a category of people that is wholly excluded from all or some sports is more than disappointing—it is unfair and occasionally illegal. Most cases of categorical exclusion are related to gender and sexuality, skin color and ethnicity, ability and disability, age and weight, nationality and citizenship, and other “eligibility” criteria. Struggles occur in connection with questions such as these:

- Will females be allowed to play sports and, if they are, will they play the same sports at the same time and on the same teams that males play, and will the rewards for achievement be the same for females and males?
- Will sports be open to people regardless of social class and wealth? Will wealthy and poor people play and watch sports together or separately?
- Will people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds play together or in segregated settings? Will the meanings given to skin color or ethnicity influence participation patterns or opportunities to play sports?
- Will age influence eligibility to play sports, and should sports be age integrated or segregated?

Will people of different ages have the same access to participation opportunities?

- Will able-bodied people and people with a disability have the same opportunities to play sports, and will they play together or separately? What meanings will be given to the accomplishments of athletes with a disability compared to the accomplishments of athletes defined as able-bodied?
- Will lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transsexuals play alongside heterosexuals and, if they do, will they be treated fairly?
- Will athletes control the conditions under which they play sports and have the power to change those conditions to meet their needs and interests?
- Will athletes be rewarded for playing, what form will the rewards take, and how will they be determined?

Federal and local laws may mandate particular answers to these questions. However, traditions, local customs, and personal beliefs often support various forms of exclusion. The resulting struggles illustrate that sports can be hotly contested activities.

*Think about sports in your school, community, and society: how have these questions been answered?*

and virtual sports as well as fitness and exercise activities.

Research in the sociology of sport generally seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Why are some activities, and not others, selected and designated as sports in particular groups and societies?
2. Why are sports created and organized in different ways at different times and in different places?
3. How do people include sports and sport participation in their lives, and does participation

affect individual development and social relationships?

4. How do sports and sport participation affect our ideas about bodies, human movement work, fun, social class, masculinity and femininity, race and ethnicity, ability and disability, achievement and competition, pleasure and pain, deviance and conformity, and aggression and violence?
5. How do various sports compare with other physical activities in producing positive health and fitness outcomes?

6. How do sports contribute to overall community and societal development, and why do so many people assume that they do?
7. How is the meaning, purpose, and organization of sports related to the culture, social structure, and resources of a society?
8. How are sports related to important spheres of social life such as family, education, politics, the economy, media, and religion?
9. How do people use their sport experiences and knowledge about sports as they interact with others and explain what occurs in their lives and the world around them?
10. How can people use sociological knowledge about sports to understand and participate more actively and effectively in society, especially as agents of progressive change?

For those of us doing research to answer these and other questions, sport provides windows into the societies and cultures in which they exist. This means that the sociology of sport tells us about more than sports in society; in reality, it tells us about the organization and dynamics of relationships in society, and about how people see themselves and others in relation to the world at large.

### **The Great Sport Myth and Resistance to the Sociology of Sport**

As organized sports have spread around the world, so has the myth that sport is essentially pure and good, and that its purity and goodness is transferred to all who participate in it. This myth supports related beliefs that sport builds character, and that anyone who plays sport will be a better person for doing so. The great sport myth is outlined in Figure 1.1.

Evidence clearly shows that the essential purity and goodness of sport is a myth and that merely participating in or consuming sports does not guarantee any particular outcomes related to character development or increased purity and goodness. In fact, we hear every day about cases that contradict the great sport myth. But that doesn't seem to weaken its uncritical acceptance by many people.

**Sport is essentially pure and good,  
and its purity and goodness are transferred  
to anyone who plays, consumes, or sponsors sports.**



**THEREFORE**

**There is no need to study and evaluate sports for  
the purpose of transforming or making them better,  
because they are already what they should be.**

**FIGURE 1.1** The great sport myth.

In fact, when the actions of athletes, coaches, spectators, and others associated with sports are inconsistent with the perceived inherent purity and goodness of sport, those who accept the myth dismiss them as exceptions—as the actions of people so morally flawed that they resist the lessons that are inherent in sports.

The great sport myth implies that there is no need to study sports or seek ways to make them better. The sociology of sport is unnecessary, say the myth-believers, because sport is inherently positive. The source of problems, they say, is the morally flawed individuals who must be purged from sports so that goodness and purity will prevail. Sport, according to myth believers, is already as it should be—a source of inspiration and pure excitement that is not available in any other activity or sphere of life.

Throughout this book, we will see how the great sport myth influences many important decisions—from creating and funding organized sport programs for “at-risk” youth to making multibillion-dollar bids to host the Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup (for men), and other sport mega-events. The myth supports a strong belief in the power of sports to bring purity and goodness to individuals in the form of positive character traits and to cities and nations in the form of revitalized civic spirit and desired development.

## Using the Sociology of Sport

Knowledge produced by research in the sociology of sport can be useful to athletes, coaches, parents, and people in sport management, recreation, physical education, public health, and community planning and development. For example, it can inform parents and coaches about the conditions under which youth sport participation is most likely to produce positive developmental effects (NASPE, 2013). It explains why some sports have higher rates of violence than others and how to effectively control sports violence (Young, 2012).

Like knowledge produced in other fields, sociology of sport knowledge can be used for negative and selfish purposes unless it is combined with concerns for fairness and social justice. For example, it can inform football coaches that they can effectively control young men in U.S. culture by threatening their masculinity and making them dependent on the coaching staff for approval of their worth as men. And it also shows that this strategy can be used to increase the willingness of young men to sacrifice their bodies “for the good of the team”—an orientation that some football coaches favor and promote.

This example shows that the sociology of sport, like other scientific disciplines, can be used for many purposes. Like others who produce and distribute knowledge, those of us who study sports in society must consider why we ask certain research questions and how our research findings might affect people’s lives. We can’t escape the fact that social life is complex and characterized by inequalities, power differences, and conflicts of interests between different categories of people. Therefore, using knowledge in the sociology of sport is not a simple process that automatically brings about equal and positive benefits for everyone. In fact, it must also involve critical thinking about the potential consequences of what we know about sports in society. Hopefully, after reading

this book you will be prepared and willing to do the following:

1. Think critically about sports so you can identify and understand the issues and controversies associated with them.
2. Look beyond performance statistics and win-loss records to see sports as social constructions that can have both positive and negative effects on people’s lives.
3. Learn things about sports that enable you to make informed choices about your sport participation and the place of sports in your family, community, and society.
4. See sports as social constructions and strive to change them when they systematically and unfairly disadvantage some categories of people as they privilege others.

**Sociology has always attempted to defatalize and denaturalize the present, demonstrating that the world could be otherwise.** —Editor.

*Global Dialogue* (2011)

## Controversies Created by the Sociology of Sport

Research in the sociology of sport can be controversial when it provides evidence that changes are needed in the ways that sports and social worlds are organized. Such evidence threatens some people, especially those who control sport organizations, benefit from the current organization of sports, or think that the current organization of sports is “right and natural.”

People in positions of power know that social and cultural changes can jeopardize their control over others and the privileges that come with it. Therefore, they prefer approaches to sports that blame problems on the weaknesses and failures of individuals. When individuals are identified as the problem, solutions emphasize the need to control individuals more effectively and teach them how to adjust to social worlds as they are currently organized.

The potential for controversy created by a sociological analysis of sports is illustrated by reviewing research findings on sport participation among

women around the world. Research shows that women, especially women in poor and working-class households, have lower rates of sport participation than do other categories of people (Donnelly and Harvey, 2007; Elling and Janssens, 2009; Tomlinson, 2007; Van Tuyckom et al., 2010). Research also shows that there are many reasons for this, including the following (Taniguchi and Shupe, 2012):

1. Women are less likely than men to have the time, freedom, “cultural permission,” and money needed to play sports regularly.
2. Women have little or no control of the facilities where sports are played or the programs in those facilities.
3. Women have less access to transportation and less overall freedom to move around at will and without fear.
4. Women often are expected to take full-time responsibility for the social and emotional needs of family members—a job that seldom allows them time to play sports.
5. Most sport programs around the world are organized around the values, interests, and experiences of men.

These reasons all contribute to the fact that many women worldwide don’t see sports as appropriate activities for them to take seriously.

It is easy to see the potential for controversy associated with these findings. They suggest that opportunities and resources to play sports should be increased for women, that women and men should share control of sports, and that new sports organized around the values, interests, and resources of women should be developed. They also suggest that there should be changes in ideas about masculinity and femininity, gender relations, family structures, the allocation of child-care responsibilities, the organization of work, and the distribution of resources in society.

People who benefit from sports and social life as they are currently organized are likely to oppose and reject the need for these changes. They might

even argue that the sociology of sport is too critical and idealistic and that the “natural” order would be turned upside down if sociological knowledge were used to organize social worlds. However, good research always inspires critical approaches to the social conditions that affect our lives. This is why studying sports with a critical eye usually occurs when researchers have informed visions of what sports and society could and should be in the future. Without these visions, often born of idealism, what would motivate and guide us as we participate in our communities, societies, and world? People who make a difference and change the world for the better have always been idealistic and unafraid of promoting structural changes in societies.

Regardless of controversies, research and popular interest in the sociology of sport has increased significantly in recent years. This growth will continue as long as scholars in the field do research and produce knowledge that people find useful as they try to understand social life and participate effectively as citizens in their communities and societies (Burawoy, 2005; Donnelly et al., 2011).

### WHY STUDY SPORTS IN SOCIETY?

We study sports because they are socially significant activities for many people, they reinforce important ideas and beliefs in many societies, and they’ve been integrated into major spheres of social life such as the family, religion, education, the economy, politics, and the media.

### Sports Are Socially Significant Activities

As we look around us, we see that the Olympic Games, soccer’s World Cup, American football’s Super Bowl, the Rugby World Cup, the Tour de France, the tennis championships at Wimbledon, and other sport mega-events attract global attention and media coverage. The biggest of these events are watched by billions of people in over two

hundred countries. The media coverage of sports provides vivid images and stories that entertain, inspire, and provide for people the words and ideas they often use to make sense of their experiences and the world around them. Even people with little or no interest in sports cannot ignore them when family and friends insist on taking them to games and talking about sports.

People worldwide talk about sports at work, at home, in bars, on campuses, at dinner tables, in school, with friends, and even with strangers at bus stops, airports, and other public places. Relationships often revolve around sports. People identify with teams and athletes so closely that the outcomes of games influence their moods, identities, and sense of well-being. In a general sense, sports create opportunities for conversations that enable people to form and nurture relationships and even enhance their personal status as they describe and critique athletes, games, teams, coaching decisions, and media commentaries. When people use sports this way, they often broaden their social networks related to work, politics, education, and other spheres of their lives. This increases their **social capital**, that is, *the social resources that link them positively to social worlds* (Harvey et al., 2007).

When people play sports, their experiences are often remembered as special and important in their lives. The emotional intensity, group camaraderie, and sense of accomplishment that often occur in sports make sport participation more memorable than many other activities.

For all these reasons, sports are logical topics for the attention of sociologists and others concerned with social life today.

### Sports Reaffirm Important Ideas and Beliefs

We also study sports because they often are organized to reaffirm ideas and beliefs that influence how people see and evaluate the world around

them. In fact, a key research topic in the sociology of sport is the relationship between sports and cultural ideologies.

We are not born with ideologies. We learn them as we interact with others and accept ideas and beliefs that are generally taken for granted in our culture. An **ideology** is a *shared interpretive framework that people use to make sense of and evaluate themselves, others, and events in their social worlds*. We learn ideologies as people around us consistently give meaning to and make sense of social phenomena in certain ways. Even if we don't agree with a particular ideology it represents the principles, perspectives, and viewpoints that are widely shared in our culture.

Most ideologies serve the interests of a particular category of people and are presented as accurate and truthful representations of the world as it is or as influential people think it should be. In this way, ideologies serve a social function and in that they can be used to justify certain decisions and actions.

When we study sports in society, it is important to know about four ideologies that influence how sports are organized and who controls and participates in them. These ideologies are organized around ideas and beliefs about gender, race, social class, and ability. Each of these ideologies is explained in terms of how it is related to sports in our lives.

### Gender Ideology

**Gender ideology** consists of *interrelated ideas and beliefs that are widely used to define masculinity and femininity, identify people as male or female, evaluate forms of sexual expression, and determine the appropriate roles of men and women in society*. The most widely shared or *dominant* gender ideology used in many societies is organized around three central ideas and beliefs:

1. Human beings are either female or male.

**In the space of a few decades, the world has come to take sport more seriously than ever before.** —Simon Kuper, journalist.  
*The Financial Times* (2012)

2. Heterosexuality is nature's foundation for human reproduction; other expressions of sexual feelings, thoughts, and actions are abnormal, deviant, or immoral.
3. Men are physically stronger and more rational than women; therefore, they are more naturally suited to possess power and assume leadership positions in the public spheres of society.

Debates about the truth of these ideas and beliefs have become common worldwide and they are part of (a) larger struggles over what it means to be a man or a woman; (b) what is defined as normal, natural, moral, legal, and socially acceptable when it comes to gender and expressing sexuality; and (c) who should have power in the major spheres of life such as the economy, politics, law, religion, family, education, health care, and sports. Today, many people have come to realize that dominant gender ideology privileges heterosexual males, gives them access to positions of power, and disadvantages women and those not socially or biologically classified as a heterosexual.

Fortunately, ideologies can be changed. But those whose interests are directly served by a dominant ideology usually possess the power and resources to resist changes and demonize those advocating alternative ideas and beliefs. For example, the girls and women who first challenged gender ideology by entering the male world of sports were generally defined as abnormal, immoral, and unnatural (see Chapter 7). The demonization of these "gender benders" was especially strong in the case of women who played sports involving power and strength and women who did not conform to norms of heterosexual femininity. Men with power and resources banned females from certain sports, refused to fund their participation, excluded them from sport facilities, labeled them as deviant, and publicly promoted ideas and beliefs that supported their discriminatory actions discrimination against females (Sartore et al., 2010; Travers, 2011; Vanini and Fornssler, 2011).

The struggles around gender ideology also influence the lives of men—most directly, those

who don't conform to prevailing ideas and beliefs about heterosexual masculinity (Anderson, 2011b; Harrison et al., 2009). In this sense certain sports, such as American football, ice hockey, boxing, and mixed martial arts, are organized, played, and described in ways that reaffirm an ideology that privileges certain boys and men over others. But as women and gender nonconforming men increasingly demonstrate their physical skills, they raise questions about and discredit dominant gender ideology (McGrath and Chananie-Hill, 2009). This means that sports are *sites*, or *social places*, where ideas and beliefs about gender are reaffirmed at the same time that oppositional ideas and beliefs are expressed. In this way, sports are important in ideological struggles related to the meaning and implication of gender in society and our everyday lives.

### Racial Ideology

**Racial ideology** consists of *interrelated ideas and beliefs that are widely used to classify human beings into categories assumed to be biological and related to attributes such as intelligence, temperament, and physical abilities*. These ideas and beliefs vary greatly from culture to culture, due to historical factors, but racial ideologies are usually divisive forces that privilege a particular category of people and disadvantage others.

Racial ideology in the United States has been and continues to be unique. Its roots date back to the seventeenth century, but it was not fully developed until slavery came to an end and white people faced a new reality in which former slaves could claim citizenship and the rights that came with it. Fear, guilt, ignorance, rumors, stereotypes, and a desire to retain power and control over blacks led whites to develop a complex set of ideas and beliefs promoting white superiority and black inferiority as facts of nature. The resulting ideology was organized around these three major ideas and beliefs:

1. Human beings can be classified into races on the basis of biologically inherited or genetically based characteristics.

Intellectual and physiological characteristics vary by race, with white people being intellectually and morally superior to black people and all people of color.

People classified as white have only white ancestors, and anyone with one or more black ancestors is classified as a black person.

The ideology based on these ideas and beliefs was used to justify segregation and discrimination based on skin color and deny that black people were real "Americans" in the full legal sense of the term.

The connections between racial ideology and sports are complex (see Chapter 8). Through much of the twentieth century whites in the United States used racial ideology to exclude African Americans and other dark-skinned people from many sports, especially those occurring in gender-mixed social settings, such as golf, tennis, and swimming.

For many years whites also believed that blacks had physical weaknesses that prevented them from excelling in certain sports. But, when blacks demonstrated physical skills that rivaled or surpassed those of whites, dominant racial ideology was revised to describe blacks as less evolved than whites and, therefore, dependent on their innate physicality for survival. At the same time, whites saw themselves at a more advanced stage of evolution and dependent on their innate intellectual abilities for survival—abilities they believed were not possessed by blacks.

This racial ideology has been challenged and factually discredited during struggles over civil rights. But its roots are so deep in U.S. culture that it still influences patterns of sport participation, beliefs about skin color and abilities, and the ways that people view sports and integrate them into their lives.

### Social Class Ideology

**Social class ideology** consists of *interrelated ideas and beliefs that are widely shared and used by people to evaluate their material status; explain why economic success, failure, and inequalities exist;*

*and what should be done about economic differences in a group or society?* The dominant class ideology in the United States is organized around three major ideas and beliefs:

1. All people have opportunities to achieve economic success.
2. The United States is a **meritocracy** where *deserving people become successful and where failure is the result of inability, poor choices, and a lack of motivation.*
3. Income and wealth inequality is normal and inevitable because some people work hard, develop their abilities, and make smart choices and others do not.

Although some people question the truth of these ideas and beliefs, the class ideology that they support is heavily promoted and remains in existence because it serves the interests of people with power and wealth.

Competitive sports in the United States have been organized and described to inspire stories and slogans that reaffirm this ideology and help sustain its popularity (see Chapter 9). Coaches, media commentators, and sport fans consistently proclaim that people can achieve anything through hard work and discipline, and that failure is the result of laziness and poor choices.

This way of thinking leads to the conclusion that wealth and power are earned by hardworking people of good character and that poverty befalls those who are careless, unwilling to work, and have weak character. As a result, there is little sympathy for the poor at the same time that winning athletes and coaches—and wealthy people generally—are widely seen as models of smart choice-making and strong character. To the extent that people accept this class ideology, socioeconomic inequality is justified and the wealth and privilege of economic elites is protected. Therefore, economic elites and the corporations they control are major sponsors of high profile, competitive sports that are organized and presented in ways that inspire widespread acceptance of this class ideology.

## Ableist Ideology

**Ableist ideology** consists of *interrelated ideas and beliefs that are widely used to identify people as physically or intellectually disabled, to justify treating them as inferior, and to organize social worlds and physical spaces without taking them into account*. This ideology in many cultures today is organized around three major ideas and beliefs:

1. People can be classified as normal or disabled.
2. Disability exists when physical or mental impairments interfere with a person's ability to function normally in everyday life.
3. Disabled people are inferior to normal people.

Underlying these ideas and beliefs is the general perspective of **ableism**, that is, *attitudes, actions, and policies based on the belief that people perceived as lacking certain abilities are inferior and, therefore, incapable of full participation in mainstream activities*. Therefore, when people use ableist ideology, they tend to patronize, pathologize, or pity those whose abilities don't "measure up" to their standards. This ideology leads to forms of social organization in which people are sorted into the categories of *able-bodied* and *disabled*.

Ableist ideology denies that there is natural variation in the physical and intellectual abilities of human beings, that abilities are situation- and task-specific, and that the abilities of all human beings change over time.

Everyday experience shows us that there are many different abilities used for many different purposes, and each of us is more or less able, depending on the situation or task. Additionally, people often forget that being *able-bodied* is not a permanent condition, because abilities change due to accidents, disease, and the normal process of aging. This means that we cannot neatly categorize everyone as either *able-bodied* or *disabled*. We can rank people from low to high on a particular ability in a particular situation or when doing a specific task, but it is impossible to have one ability-based ranking system across all situations and tasks encountered in everyday life, or even in sports.

Variations across all physical and intellectual abilities are a normal part of human life. But ableist ideology and ableism obscure this fact and prevent us from realistically dealing with ability differences in society.

*In summary*, ideologies are important parts of culture. People are usually unaware of them because they are simply taken for granted in their lives. As ideologies are widely shared and used as a basis for establishing, organizing, and evaluating social relationships and all forms of social organization, they are woven over time into the fabric of a society. This makes them different from the ideas and beliefs of individuals or those shared only with family members and friends.

Ideologies also resist change. They are defended by those who use them to make sense of the world and those whose privilege depends on them. Sometimes they are connected with religious beliefs and given intrinsic moral value, which fosters intense resistance to change. Although we rarely acknowledge our ideologies, we frequently recognize the ideologies of people from other cultures because they challenge our taken-for-granted assumptions. When this occurs we often criticize "foreign" ideologies while we leave our own unexamined. However, in this book we will take a critical look at dominant gender, racial, class, and ableist ideologies in Chapters 7–10.

## Sports Are Integrated into Major Spheres of Social Life

Another reason for using sociology to study sports is that they are clearly connected to major spheres of social life. This will become increasingly clear in the following chapters. For example, Chapters 4 and 5 deal with family relationships and how they influence sport participation and how sports influence family life today. Issues involving the economy are covered in most chapters, and Chapter 11 is dedicated to examining the commercialization of sports and the changes that come with it. The media are closely connected with contemporary sports, and new social media are now changing the

ways in which fans engage athletes and consume sports. This is explained in Chapter 12.

Government and politics are no strangers to sports, although their influence has changed as sports have become increasingly global and less dependent on nation-states. This is the topic of Chapter 13. The connections between interscholastic sports, the lives of students, the academic mission of schools, and the organization of high schools and colleges is the focus of Chapter 14. Finally, Chapter 15 deals with the complex relationships between major world religions and sports. Overall, sports are not only visible and important activities in themselves, but they are linked to major spheres of life in today's societies.

### summary

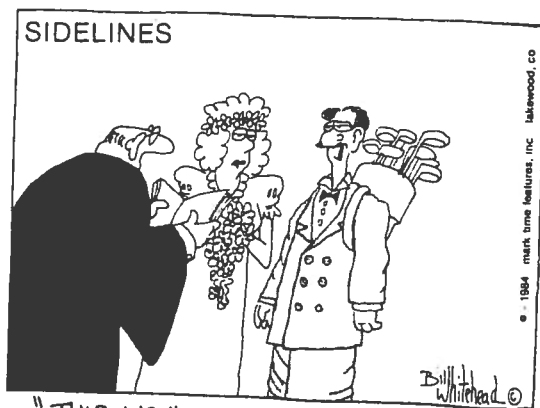
#### WHY STUDY THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT?

Sociology is the study of *the social worlds that people create, organize, maintain, and change through their relationships with each other*. Sociologists use concepts, research, and theories to describe and

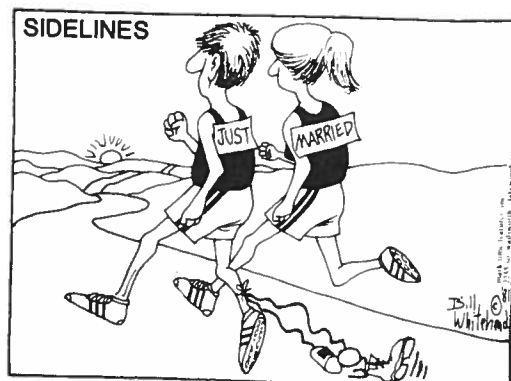
explain social worlds. In the process, they enable us to put the lives of individuals and groups into context. This makes us aware of the circumstances that set limits and create possibilities in people's lives. For most sociologists, the ultimate goal is to create and distribute knowledge that enables people to understand, control, and improve the conditions of their lives and the social worlds in which they live.

Sociologists use the concepts of culture, social interaction, and social structure as they investigate social worlds. Sociological knowledge about sports and other social worlds is based on data systematically collected in research. This makes it different from statements about sports that are based only on personal experience and opinions.

Defining sports presents a challenge. If we use a single definition that emphasizes organization and competition, it can lead us to ignore people who have neither the resources nor the desire to develop formally organized and competitive physical activities. For this reason, many of us in the sociology of sport prefer an alternative definitional approach based on the assumption that sports are social constructions and that conceptions of sports vary over time and from one social world to another.



(Source: By permission of William Whitehead)



(Source: By permission of William Whitehead)

Families and family schedules often are shaped by sport involvement, sometimes interfering with family relationships (left) and sometimes creating enjoyable time together (right).


 reflect on  
SPORTS

## The Body Is More than Physical

### *Sports Influence Meanings Given to the Body*

Until recently, most people viewed the body as a fixed fact of nature; it was biological only. But many scholars and scientists now recognize that a full understanding of the body requires that we view it in social and cultural terms (Adelman & Ruggi, 2015; Dworkin and Wachs, 2009; Eichberg, 2011; Hargreaves and Vertinsky, 2006; Wellard, 2012). For example, medical historians explain that the body and body parts have been identified and defined differently through history and from one culture to another. This is important because it affects medical practice, government policies, social theories, sport participation, and our everyday experiences.

The meanings given to the body and body parts in any culture are the foundation for people's ideas and beliefs about sex, gender, sex and gender differences, sexuality, beauty, self-image, body image, fashion, hygiene, health, nutrition, eating, fitness, ability and disability, age and aging, racial classification systems, disease, drugs and drug testing, violence and power, and other factors that affect our lives.

Cultural definitions of the body influence deep personal feelings such as pleasure, pain, sexual desires, and other sensations that we use to assess personal well-being, relationships, and quality of life. For example, people in Europe and North America during the nineteenth century identified insensitivity to physical pain as a sign that a person had serious character defects, and they saw a muscular body as an indicator of a criminal disposition, immorality, and lower-class status (Hoberman, 1992).

Cultural definitions of the body have changed so that today we see a person's ability to ignore pain, especially in sports, as an indicator of strong moral character, and we see a muscular body as proof of self-control and discipline rather than immorality and criminal tendencies. But in either case, our identities and experiences are inherently embodied, and our bodies are identified in connection with social and cultural definitions of age, sex, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and ability, among other factors.

Definitions of the body are strongly related to sports in many societies. For example, our conception of the

"ideal body," especially the ideal male body, is strongly influenced by the athletic body (van Amsterdam et al., 2012). In fact, the bodies of athletes are used as models of health and fitness, strength and power, control and discipline, and overall ability.

In today's competitive sports, the body is measured, monitored, classified, conditioned, trained, regulated, and assessed in terms of its performance under various conditions. Instead of being experienced as a source of pleasure and joy, the body is more often viewed as a machine used to achieve important goals. As a machine, its parts must be developed, coordinated, maintained, monitored, and repaired. Additionally, when the athletic body fails due to injuries, impairments, and age, it is reclassified in ways that alter a person's identity, relationships, and status.

*Socially constructing* the body in this way emphasizes control and rationality. It leads people to accept forms of body regulation such as weigh-ins, measuring body-fat percentage, testing for aerobic and anaerobic capacity, observing physiological responses to stressors, doing blood analysis, dieting, using drugs and other substances, drug testing, and on and on. For example, the members of the U.S. women's national soccer team must wear heart monitors on their chest and GPS devices in specially designed sport bras during practices so coaches and trainers can determine how hard they work, their fitness level, and their on-field strategy awareness (Reilly, 2012). Similar technology is now used by other coaches to monitor the energy and effort being exerted by athletes while on the field of play (Newcomb, 2012a, 2012b). All this helps coaches know how to "discipline" athletes' bodies and achieve performance goals.

Cultural conceptions of *body as machine* and *sport as performance* make it likely that athletes will use brain manipulations, hormonal regulation, body-part replacements, and genetic engineering as methods of disciplining, controlling, and managing their bodies. Measurable performance outcomes then become more important than subjective experiences of physical pleasure and joy. As a result, the ability to endure pain and stay in the game is an indicator of the "disciplined body;" and bodies that

*Continued*

reflect on  
SPORTS

## The Body Is More than Physical (*continued*)



The ideal male body? Before he gained fame as “Conan the Destroyer” and “The Terminator” in films and became the governor of California (2003-2011), Austria-born Arnold Schwarzenegger was a legendary bodybuilder who won five Mr. Universe and seven Mr. Olympia titles. This statue outside the Schwarzenegger Museum in Austria captures one of his signature poses, which have had a worldwide impact on ideas about the male body and its representation of power and strength. However, ideas about the body change over time *and* are shaped by many social and cultural factors. (Source: © MARKUS LEODOLTER/epa/Corbis)

are starved to reduce body fat to unhealthy levels are ironically viewed as “fit” and “in shape.”

When we realize that human life is embodied and that bodies are socially constructed in the context of culture, those who think critically ask the following questions:

1. What are the origins of prevailing ideas about natural, ideal, and deviant bodies in sports and in society?
2. What are the moral and social implications of the ways that the body is protected, probed, monitored, tested, trained, disciplined, evaluated, manipulated, and rehabilitated in sports?
3. How are bodies in sports marked and categorized by gender, skin color, ethnicity, (dis)ability, and age, and what are the social implications of such body marking and categorization?
4. How are athletic bodies represented in the media and popular culture, and how do those representations influence identities, relationships, and forms of social organization in society?
5. Who owns the body of an athlete, including the athletes’ tattoos, and under what conditions can bodies or tattoos be used to promote products, services, beliefs, or ideas?
6. If moving the body were seen primarily as a source of pleasure rather than tool for achievement and weight control, would more people engage in physical activity?

These questions challenge taken-for-granted ideas about nature, beauty, health, and competitive sports. Ask yourself: *how have your ideas about bodies, including your own, been influenced by sports and the culture in which you live?*

Therefore, we try to explain why certain activities, and not others, are identified as sports in a particular group or society, why some sports are more strongly supported and funded than others, and how various categories of people are affected by commonly used definitions of sports and related funding priorities.

This alternative approach to defining sports also emphasizes that they are contested activities, because people can disagree about their meaning, purpose, and organization. Furthermore, people often have different ideas about who should play sports and the conditions under which participation should occur. Debates over who plays and who is excluded can create heated exchanges and bitter feelings, because they are tied to notions of fairness and the allocation of resources in social worlds. Finally, people can also disagree over which sports will be sponsored, who will sponsor them, and how much control sponsors should have over sports.

Asking critical questions about sports in society is the starting point for doing the sociology of sport. This forces us to think about why sports take particular forms and who is advantaged and disadvantaged by the current organization of sports in a social world. The sociology of sport often struggles for acceptance in societies where many people accept the great sport myth—that is, the assumption that sports are pure and good and that all who play or consume them will share in this purity and goodness. This assumption leads to the conclusion that it is not necessary to study and critically evaluate sport because it is essentially good as it is.

When sociologists study sports in society, they often discover problems related to the structure and organization of sports or the social worlds in which sports exist. Although we might be well informed about social issues, we usually lack the political power or influence to bring about change. Additionally, our recommendations may threaten those who benefit by maintaining the status quo in sports. This leads some people to see the sociology

of sport as controversial, but we continue to do research and produce knowledge that can be used to promote fairness and social justice.

People study sports in society because sports are socially significant activities for many people: they provide excitement, memorable experiences, and opportunities to initiate and extend social relationships. Sports also reaffirm and sometimes challenge important ideas and beliefs, especially those related to gender, race and ethnicity, social class, and ability.

Finally, sports are studied because they are closely tied to major spheres of social life such as family, economy, media, politics, education, and religion.

Overall, sports are such an integral part of everyday life that they cannot be ignored by anyone concerned with the organization and dynamics of social life today.

#### **SUPPLEMENTAL READINGS:**

- Reading 1. Why should I take sociology of sport as a college course?
- Reading 2. The sociology and psychology of sport: what's the difference?
- Reading 3. Play, games, and sports: They're all related to each other
- Reading 4. Professional associations in the sociology of sport
- Reading 5. Where to find sociology of sport research
- Reading 6. Basketball: An idea becomes a sport

#### **SPORT MANAGEMENT ISSUES**

- You work for a sport management consulting firm. A client wants to invent a new sport that will attract participants as well as eventual media coverage, and asks you to submit a proposal covering what must occur and how long it might take. Describe the outline you will use for your "create a sport" proposal.